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ABSTRACT

A field study was conducted with a cross-section of the population in rural and urban Canadian regions to discover whether people were performing economic activities of significance to their well-being that differ from those society usually acknowledges as being economic in nature. In both rural and urban areas, the economy was viewed as being composed of formal (domestic) and informal (community) factions. Family networking and a mutual social support system were found to be essential characteristics of cooperative social and economic networks in the informal economy. In hard times and with uncertain futures, families were found to reassess their priorities and to revalue skills and knowledge for survival. Data indicated that people who were pursuing paths of greater self-reliance, co-reliance, and self-sufficiency were doing so either by choice or economic necessity. Three groupings of strategies employed by families choosing alternate patterns included changes made by (1) reestablishment of homes, occupations, and social environment; (2) cooperative living arrangements; and (3) development of new convictions concerning alternate living styles. Families living with fewer resources out of necessity revealed concern for essential elements such as food, clothing, shelter, and care for children and elders. Implications for rural development suggested that the informal economy has taken on special significance and that people need to develop their talents and capacities for self-reliance as well as to seek opportunities in their environments and relationships with others. (BJD)

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PERSPECTIVES

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STRATEGIES OF SELF-RELIANCE, CO-RELIANCE AND SELF-SUFFICIENCY AND THEIR MEANING FOR RURAL FAMILIES IN THE 1980'S

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This workshop is concerned with challenges to rural families and is based upon the belief that families can determine the kind of future they want and participate in building it.

In thinking over what I might contribute to this workshop, I was encouraged by a recent opportunity to attend a seminar with Dr. Elise Boulding, one of North America's most challenging voices on the subjects of family, women, social change and learning. I was encouraged by her belief in the importance of 'imaging' the future, for it is in our imaging that we create the goals and the will to bring about that future; encouraged by her understanding that the family, far from being a passive reactor to outside forces, is an agent of social change.

In 1921, sixty years ago, the imaging of the future was based upon the promises of science and technology. It was to be a tasteful, free, just society, -- no more war, injustice or poverty: a society designed by science.

Now, we see much of what has been constructed crumbling about us. We are facing a reconstruction of our images of the future. Very much of this is connected with the family and our communities. We have learned that technological skill does not protect or nurture the human being.

Dr. Boulding pointed out that the family, our smallest social institution in society is the most adaptive, the most flexible, and the basic problem-solving unit. The family passes on survival skills for hard times. Within the family there is an on-going crafting process -- what human beings construct for nurturing over time.

It was her view and perspective that "new models for living will not arise from futurists' theories but decades of increasing social disorganization as institutional sclerosis and breakdowns spread throughout a hierarchical society."

Dr. Boulding also warned that "seeing the family as a psychological and physical haven from the pressures of social change is seeing a myth".

Rural Families and the Informal Economy

The perspective of these remarks is based upon a perception of economic activity as human activity, not primarily an exchange of things and money. In other words, "satisfaction of personal, familial and community needs," not increasing consumption of material goods and services, should be "the ultimate aim of the economy."(1)

Today, I would like to share with you some experiences I had recently in talking with a cross section of people and families in several different regions of Canada, many of whom are living in rural areas. These experiences came about while I was associated with the Vanier Institute of the Family as a research fellow. One of the important areas of public policy in which the Institute has been engaged in recent years has been that of 'the family and the economy'.

The purpose of my field visits to Prince Edward Island, Cape Breton Island, Ontario, Saskatchewan and British Columbia was to gather information about people's views on their economies. Under several broad themes, people were asked to describe and reflect upon significant aspects of their main daily life activities and their basic economic implications. They were asked about what constituted their notions of well-being, their work both paid and unpaid, their learning, how they brought together the resources they needed (talents, skills, natural and manmade goods, income), their decisions on the use of these resources, and what they saw and experienced in the meaning of self-reliance, co-reliance and self-sufficiency. An important underlying question was: are people performing economic activities of significance to their well-being that differ from those our society usually sees and acknowledges?

As the aim of the enquiry was to better understand the full and diverse range of economic functions performed by family members to attain their well-being, it was necessary to see the economy much more broadly than what is accounted for in official statistics, in the Gross National Product, and in the traditional three sectors of the formal economy -- the resource extraction, manufacturing and service sectors.

In fact, when we recognize the whole economy, there are at least two additional sectors that are the base or foundation upon which the formal economy rests. The best known is the domestic or family sector made up of a vast amount of daily work and activities of family members, most of it unpaid. There is also a community sector, which is mainly a non-cash-or-credit economy involving gifts, barter or other informal arrangements for sharing work, skills, goods and services. What happens in the domestic and community sectors, in contrast with the formal economy, is largely invisible in quantified terms, unrecorded, untracked and until more recently, undervalued in its function of helping to meet and satisfy our basic needs, our sense of satisfaction and our well-being.

On Cape Breton Island, very early in the field studies, I discovered the term for self-reliant activities and use of cooperative social and economic networks in the community is widely recognized and commonly understood as "the informal economy". Elsewhere in Canada these same kinds of relationship networks are found in active use among members of immigrant groups, seasonally employed workers and their families, in intentional communities; they are also traditional to kinship and tribal relationships of Indian and Metis people; and they are now being forged among young people and families in rural areas as well as in the cities.

What then are the essential characteristics of cooperative social and economic networks within the informal economy? The two main and interrelated components might be described as, firstly, in the existence over time, of a network of families and persons of sufficient number and diversity in their talents, skills and resources to engage in certain modes of non-cash/non-credit economic activities. These are often related to extended family and kinship groups. Networks operate through complementary exchanges of work, skills and goods, including bartering as well as gifts of various kinds, to provide self and network produced shelter, repairs and maintenance, food, clothing, sources of heat and energy, transportation, and social and recreational activities. Secondly, a mutual social support system, where the people involved are known and have credibility with each other, and where frequently the social participation and satisfactions are integral to the work being done.

Coming to Grips with an Uncertain Future

A major challenge for rural families today, whether they are farming or living in non-farm rural areas, is how they will develop and manage their resources and relationships in times of uncertainty about the future.

People expressed serious concerns over current economic and social trends, over a precarious economy with high unemployment, inflation and interest rates. They were aware of growing scarcities -- in energy, non-renewable resources, even sufficient food. Nor did they expect this will improve for some time. It may indeed get worse. They were mindful of large systems upon which great numbers of people including farmers have become dependent, on electrical grids required to pump water throughout whole farming regions, on gasoline and fuel shortages, on supplies of pure water.

Doubtless, these widespread concerns over current directions in societal conditions have been contributing to a renewed interest and a distinct trend toward long-standing rural values and activities, in self-reliance, cooperation with others and self-sufficiency at the level that families seek to make decisions about their life activities. Some are choosing to reduce their dependence upon large-scale impersonal economic systems. A growing number question the goals of a consumer society and are actively interested in conserving energy, water, food, and reducing waste and pollution. In a positive vein, people spoke of changing their ways of living to get more satisfaction out of what they can do for themselves and with others; to expand their pratical skills and to use technologies and tools that can be used and repaired, instead of having to rely on expert repairmen. Fundamentally, there was a widespread desire to regain more control over the circumstances that govern their lives. This has meant a revaluing of skills and knowledge that for a number of years had been put down as 'old fashioned'; a realization that if things get really tough, those who can manage for themselves in their life activities will survive best.

Emerging Patterns of Self-reliance, Co-reliance and Self-sufficiency

In classifying the information gained from the enquiry, it was interesting to discover that there were distinct similarities, clusters of families with similar aims, outlooks and circumstances, although they might be living in entirely different regions of the country. It was also evident that those who were pursuing paths of greater self-reliance, co-reliance and self-sufficiency were doing so either by choice, or through necessity.

Let me mention briefly three groupings of families whose strategies were moving toward greater self-reliance and were based primarily on their choice to do so:

1. Exploring: From New Beginnings to Growing Self-Sufficiency

The striking characteristic of this group of families was that each had made a decision to change their established ways of living and had given up, or let go of important aspects of their former lives -- their homes, occupations and social environment. Most frequently this had meant moving to live in a rural area. Some had previous experience in farm living, others had very little.

The reasons for the changes were unique to each family, but represented an attempt to fulfill their lives in different ways. The shifts that took place brought about new and often unforeseen problems to be solved. It became necessary to develop new skills, and to make adaptations and alterations in how they conducted their basic life activities. This meant, among other things, new efforts to become more self-reliant and to use informal practices of exchange and mutual support in a variety of social and economic networks that they may have initiated, or to which they became attached.

2. Living Cooperatively -- Learning Inter-Reliance

The second theme refers to people's experience in different forms of cooperative living arrangements. The patterns vary considerably and may include sharing land, shelter, food, talents, skills, care of children and may extend to a full range of life activities. This theme is important because it points to alternatives people are exploring together, to suit their values and their purposes even if it means moving to the edges of the surrounding society.

What these experiences illustrate is that choices to live cooperatively are frequently related to attitudes that emphasize co-reliance and mutual support. Although these arrangements are not entered into for purely economic reasons, because of willingness to share and the quality of interpersonal relationships, there are many tangible economic benefits that reduce dependency on the cash/credit economy.

3. Voices of Conviction: Choosing Ways to Live Differently

Common to this grouping was that the people had developed a general life philosophy -- a set of convictions by which they were guiding their purposes, choices and main life strategies. The philosophy was often related to ideas of conserving, and convictions that inducements to consume and waste were to be resisted. But these convictions usually meant something beyond conserving because of perceived scarcities. They were positively associated with conscious and deliberate efforts to bring persons, things and nature back into greater balance and harmony. The economic implications for families who follow these convictions are of great interest because they tend to place greater emphasis on making greater use of their own resources, their own efforts, to use simpler and less harsh technologies, and alternative sources of energy. In short, they have a much closer awareness of, and dependence upon the informal economy.

A Matter of Necessity

I would now like to turn to the movement toward greater self-reliance and self-sufficiency among those many Canadians for whom this is a matter of necessity. Many of these families are to be found in rural areas seen to be economically unviable. But below the surface, as was shown in the Mackenzie Pipeline Inquiry, there is a viable subsistence economy. This was brought to light among the Dene and Inuit of the North.(2) It has always been there.

Living With Less -- Resourcefully

This theme deals with experiences of those who are living with less, not by choice or preference as it had been with others, but out of necessity, and who are finding resourceful ways to maintain and enhance their well-being. Such people may be retired and living on fixed incomes; they may be unemployed, under-employed or seasonally employed, or single-parent families. They are representative of the circumstances of many Canadians, who because they have access to fewer resources, especially cash or credit, have had no choice but to live differently.

There are those with limited means who are unable to take part in the informal economy and for whom special provision is essential. Others have been able to discover additional resources, including their natural talents and new skills, forms of sharing and cooperation with others, and self-help activities, to live fuller and more satisfying lives, although they may have small monthly cash income. I wish there were more time to give some illustrations. Take for example, the situation of many fishermen who are employed during the fishing season for three months. In the off-season, there is a considerable amount of work to be done in repairing nets and preparing boats. But there is usually some farming and exchanges with others that are going on all the time -- for food, fish, car and truck repairs, building, and other odd jobs. Although most of this work is unpaid, it is of great practical and psychological benefit and promotes a strong spirit of cooperation with others.

I am prompted to make a few observations that grew out of the field studies. Those who are managing with less are most concerned about the essential elements of their life activities -- food, shelter, clothing, transportation, raising their children decently and in some cases caring for their elders. As human beings they must also find emotional support, a sense of security, interaction with others and means of social expression.

Hard times, and these times are for many families, have forced them to become more resourceful and self-reliant; and they have turned to the informal economy to meet their needs. The informal economy is mainly to be found in small-scale and local groupings made up of family, friends, neighbours and others in similar circumstances.

When the informal economy was the rock basis for many families, as in the days of early settlement, immigration or during the Depression years, it prevented acute deprivation, but it required hard work and skilled management of family resources. Now, when many are looking urgently for ways to save, to make money stretch, the informal economy offers a natural alternative.

Taking part in the informal economy does not happen as a matter of course. It is most likely to take place when people:

- know their milieu, feel trusting of others and comfortable with their community;
- have something to give, exchange, share (such as a practical skill, talent, training, interest);
- have sufficient time, and are not selfish of their time so they can become engaged in doing things for themselves, with and for others;
- care about others, and feel they can help out;
- believe they have a stake in their own survival, and are determined to do something for themselves.

Implications and Priorities for Rural Development

It is beyond the scope of these short remarks to comment upon the many significant implications of this trend of rural families toward greater self-reliance, co-reliance and self-sufficiency upon our public policies for rural development in the future. Although we speak of unemployment as though the unemployed are not working and contributing to their livelihoods and to society, in the informal economy the meaning of work is greatly expanded and materially affects how people are able to manage their daily lives. Inflation, which dominated a price-conscious and price-dependent society is of little relevance when cash/credit are not the means of self-reliance or exchanging with others. People simply agree among themselves on the value they give to skills, goods and

services. Profit ceases to be a prime motive. And the attitude is to protect the natural environment, not to exploit it, for without it there can be no self-sufficiency.

What does it all mean?

It may suggest that we are already into a major transition -- renouncing, with some reluctance perhaps, some of the promises and rewards of an advanced technological post-industrial society, and witnessing a search for a simpler, more humanized living.

If the viewpoint is taken from where people are, in their own lives, I was surprised and excited to realize how many rural families are leading happy and fulfilling lives, satisfied that they are using their time and talents in ways that are personally rewarding. But it doesn't just happen. And it takes time. People have to be realistic about their needs. They need to recognize what brings them their real satisfactions and fulfillment in living, to develop their talents and capacities for self-reliance, and to seek opportunities in their environments and relationships with others.

The fact is, when people speak for themselves, for what they see as central to their lives, they make decisions and choices, and have unexpected powerful resources, which they determine to use in ways that suit them. It is under such circumstances that the informal economy has taken on special meaning and significance.

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And now, in a last moment, let us return to my beginning perspective: a perception of economic activity as human activity, not primarily an exchange of things and money.

Over twenty centuries ago, for Aristotle and for his contemporaries, the study of economics was the study of the household. Oikonomia, the original meaning of economics referred to the stewardship of the household.

The fundamental question that Aristotle posed was "how can men (sic) live together? How can they manage their resources and their relationships?" The questions, in all cultures and societies, over time and today are the same after twenty centuries.

Finally, whether it is for Aristotle, or ourselves, it is always important to keep our priorities straight. I am sure that you will agree they haven't changed:

> It is clear then that in household management the people are the greater importance than the material property and their quality of more account than that of the goods that make up their wealth.(3)

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